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The Present of Poetry

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

“It is wrong to say: I think.
One ought to say: People think me.”¹

Poetry thinks. This is an affirmation which marks the starting point of the present issue of *Crisis and Critique*. Poetry thinks and it is a unique and singular mode of thought. This means its *modus cogitandi* is different from that of politics, science, or philosophy as well as from the modes in which other forms of art think. Poetry thinks - in an artistically singular way and thereby shares something with all other arts. There is therefore something collective in its practice. But it is nevertheless unique. It also shares something with other ways of thinking. There is something universal in its practice. But it is nevertheless singular. The affirmation that “poetry thinks” therefore challenges substantializing conceptualizations of what is thought and of what thought is. That poetry thinks does also not mean - to some degree contra Heidegger - that only art and only poetry thinks. Rather it means to affirm that if there is thought, it can be poetic. To affirm that there can be poetic thought, that “poetry thinks” does not mean to substantialize. One avoids substantialization if one reads in this affirmation also an implicit second one, namely one that concerns the existence of a plurality of singular modes of thought. Thought is singular (and specific), but there is more than just one singular mode of thought. It is precisely such a plurality, commonality or communism of singularities that allows to point to and point out the very universality inscribed into each singular mode of thought. The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* is devoted to the singular universality of poetic thought.

Poetry, by manifesting the singular dimension of (its) thought, challenges any (philosophical) substantialization of the being of thought. “The poem is an exercise in intransigence”, not only to philosophy but also, it therefore “remains rebellious.”² It does not mean that it is opaque - this is part of the cliché - or that it is “saying” it without properly saying “it” - this is the other side of the same cliché. But it is rebellious because it produces a clarity of another kind. It is clearly and a distinctively singular mode of thought and hence articulates something universal - it is therefore a concrete form of thinking “*clara et distincte*” (Descartes). As such, poetry is and remains rebellious and bothersome. Poems are b(r)others - and sisters - not in arms, but in thought. They bother, not only, but also often and certainly, philosophy, especially by making apparent, visible and audible that there is thought in forms yet unexplored, yet unarticulated, yet unsaid and that thought - only? - thinks if it explores

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1 Rimbaud 2005, p. 371.

2 Badiou 2014, p. 23.

what has been unexplored, articulates what appeared to be inarticulable, if it says the unsayable. Poetry would then be the art of actually saying what is impossible to say. This is one of the reasons why the affirmation that “poetry thinks” does not come easy to some, many of whom have been philosophers and this even though the task of philosophy was also frequently defined as wagering on the universality of any singular mode of thought. Philosophers have often struggled with admitting, avowing or, at least, avoiding disavowing that poetry is not only capable of thought, but that it thinks in a way that problematizes philosophy’s claim to the mastery of (the being of) thought. This has to do with the idea that philosophers had and have of what counts as a (legitimate mode of) thinking - and thereby of what the task of philosophy is. That philosophers often found their poetic b(r)others in thought bothersome results from the former not seeing in the latter’s articulation the thought-expression of some-brother, but rather of something heterogeneous, alien, or foreign to - what was supposed to be - thought. Poetry can thereby appear to philosophy as a foreigner to thought.

Bachmann’s “I step outside myself” makes, for example and paradigmatically, thought’s point in the most poetically clear manner. It points out the point of thought and this is somewhat and unavoidably outside of thought. It does so by articulating thought’s own inner outsideness, its outsider-nature, within thought. But if there is thought that has always already happened:

I step outside
myself, out of my eyes,
hands, mouth, outside
of myself I
step, a bundle
of a goodness and godliness
that must make good
this devilry
that has happened.³

Poetic thinking is out-siding, stepping out, stepping out into a side, out-standing, siding, siding with the idea of thinking from the side, from the out, from the outside. Outing. But if “that has happened”, if “that must make good”, the demand on any thinking of this thought is that it interiorizes what is out-warding, that it internalizes what was never inner, that it accommodates what can only be a stranger, that it prepares a(n in-)side to what is unavoidably the result from a movement outside, from out-siding, from siding with the out-side. Poetry in this sense forces philosophy to confront the fact that thinking thought in its singularity

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³ Bachmann 2006, p. 465.

must inevitably mean that one must start from what appears foreign, outside, or off(side). But, to recall Simmel's definition of "the stranger" here, she is "who comes today and stays to morrow."⁴ Poetry makes us in this sense think what is here to stay (forever). It is what comes today and does s(t)ay for tomorrow.

There is in this sense no end to and of poetry's rebellion, since it is what is at the foundation of (its own) rationality. This produced many irritations within philosophy and not rarely desires of censorship, of control, or expulsion. And one can ultimately see it becoming manifest in all the things that philosophers claimed that the artists and especially the poets ruin (*vis-à-vis* thinking, politics, philosophy, etc.). It is a symptom of philosophy('s own problematic conception of thought). This certainly has to do, historically speaking, with the fact that philosophy begins to be philosophy by cutting its ties and separating itself from poetry, from its own appearing in and being-sutured to the poetic form.⁵ But it is also the case because as a result of its distancing act, the relationship between poetry and philosophy started to turn out to be determined by a peculiar rivalry. Famously, an articulation of this quarrel can be found in the tenth book of Plato's *Politeia*, where it was phrased and formulated in political, epistemological and ontological terms.

What the poets - and artists in general (Plato does not really discriminate much between the arts) - do is that they disorient (epistemically), because they make us blunder about the most profound things (in our lives) as they are able to create a passionate engagement for what is not true or good - in mere semblances and hence fakery. They disorient us (ontologically) through their fictional creations, because they give the impression that everything could be other than it is. This has practically disastrous effects for any (political) collective. The poets, paradigmatically embodied by the creators of theater, through their staging and mimicking of real actions, make people lose their direction, they make them lose track of what is truly good. That poets can be blamed for such disorientation is not only providing solid grounds for expelling them from any (ideal) political organization in Plato's view, but furthermore implies that any artists remaining within the polis must be put under the supervisor and guidance of those who (epistemologically) know the (ontologically) true and good orientation which grounds all collective (politically) practice, namely the philosophers. If there is poetry in the ideal city, it must be ideal-city-poetry or state-art. But with this ban of the poets, Plato inadvertently admitted the arts' and thereby poetry's ultimate power: poetry has a capacity to disorient and thereby to reorient, to transform and change ontological assumptions and what cannot but appear to be

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4 Simmel 1950, p. 402.

5 On the complexities of philosophy's beginnings, cf. Karatani 2017.

even (what ought to be stable) ontologies. The reason why Plato believed poetry to be dangerous to the political community therefore also indicates its (epistemological, ontological, political) potential. But it could not have such power if it were not able to ultimately stand in competition with what Plato addresses in terms of the idea (of the good - or the idea of what is an idea). This is also what is at stake with the infamous discussion about mimesis as fundamental to the concept of art and poetry. Poetic thought could not disorient, reorient us, if it were not able to intervene on the level of ideas, if it could not be a mimesis of the idea and hence productive of ideas itself. This is to say, it would not be dangerous ultimately if it did not have the power to touch the (very) idea (of the idea, i.e. the idea of the good). Plato's critique of the poets thus implies their greatest praise, as it points to the affirmation that poetry is always poetry not with but of the idea, or, in other words: that poetry thinks.

Poetry thinks. But what and how does it think? This is one of the questions the present issue of *Crisis and Critique* seeks to address. It does so through the lens and by addressing what the title of the issue articulates as "the present of poetry." This is not to raise the question of what poetry looks like or what poetry is pertinent or is read or is celebrated or sells well - does any? - today. Addressing the "present of poetry" means to take seriously that poems articulate what they say in a temporality of their own. Their mode of speaking is not that of their own historical present, which is why they therefore raise the question of what it means to be a contemporary - an issue that explicitly bothered poets like Mandelstam, for example. The present of poetry is thus not that of the historical time of this or that poet or poem but rather the time, the present created by poetry's articulation. It often is the time of resistance to the dominance temporal regime. In Maya Angelou's words, for example:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.⁶

"Poetry thinks" means that it speaks (un)timely. The present issue thus seeks to examine how poetry speaks, articulates, presents, captures - its own - time; how its singularity, its singular mode of articulation captures something that is universal in its present, or how the present that it creates is the present of something universal that only exists because of its singular creation and invention.

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6 Angelou 1978.

The question of the present of poetry is certainly not a new one. It has been raised many times before and in multiple different terms. One specific take on the relation between poetry and its present was formulated in “one of Adorno’s most brilliant essays”⁷, namely his “Lyric Poetry and Society.”⁸ Therein, Adorno argues that lyric poetry is an artistic form defined by establishing a singular type of distance to the very society in which it appears. It is an art of distance, of distancing. The reason for this is that its mode of articulation makes it impossible for it to be explained by reference to its historical conjuncture (only). An effect of this is that poetry speaks and thinks in a language that most members of the society whose poetry it is do not understand, even though it is theirs. This is not the case because poetic language would be a foreign language. Rather, it enforces a becoming-foreign of language, an alienation of the language that one believes one understands all-too well (and then realizes one does not). Thereby, poetry forces an awareness of what otherwise does not only go unnoticed but even disappears in and because of its invisibilizing everyday uses. Poetry makes a different use of language because, in the words of Alain Badiou, “the poem is the guardian of the decency of saying. Or of what Jacques Lacan called the ethics of well-saying.”⁹ To affirm that “poetry thinks” means to take seriously that it does something with and to language that language usually does not do (when we do with it what we do with language). By using language otherwise, privately and therein pace Wittgenstein, by speaking differently, lyric poetry becomes, for Adorno, “a sphere of expression whose very essence lies in either not acknowledging the power of socializing or overcoming it through the pathos of detachment.”¹⁰ Poetry allows for detachment, it implies an act of *déliation* - “it has a moment of discontinuity in it.”¹¹ Therein one can see an expression of “poetic courage.”¹² It is a courage of establishing a singular, yet universalizable asociality within language.

This implies that any (reductive) attempt to articulate what poetry does in terms of its own time and social context - and even in terms of the language of its time, i.e. bad generalization -, any attempt to conceive of poetry solely through historicization and contextualization misses what needs to be thought when one seeks to think poetic thought. This, obviously, raises the stakes for approaching “the present of poetry.” How

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7 Jameson 1971, p. 35.

8 Adorno 2019, pp. 59-73.

9 Badiou 2014, p. 25.

10 Adorno 2019, p. 59.

11 Ibid., p. 62.

12 Badiou 2014, p. 73.

to factor into its present the act of detachment from what it is present, from what it is co-present with? If a poem is not an additional voice in the chorus of present chatter, if it is not simply adding another thing to what was said before, but rather adding by subtracting, adding by minussing in such a way that it brings about a new mode of saying (or a new articulation of what is a new mode of saying), this ultimately coincides with nothing less than with a specific kind of creation. Poetic creation is the creation of a militant new “silence in order to say that which is impossible to say in the language of the consensus, to separate it from the world so that it may be said and always re-said for the first time.”¹³ The present of poetry, in this account, is the time to re-say singularly what poems have said in other singular ways before repeatedly; it is the eternal return of the say-ing.

Is poetry thus the art of saying (it silently)? For Adorno poetry exemplifies - through its inherently collectively asocial nature - what he calls an “unrestrained individuation.”¹⁴ This does not mean that a poem allows an individual to speak as an individual in a private language that would be the expression of an inner life untouched by society. It is rather, an expression of what can be taken to be a paradigm of a subjectivization *sub specie aeternitatis*. Poetry subjectivizes but not according to context, yet singularly. There is something genuinely universal in this singularization, since it exemplifies the universal need of finding singular modes of articulation, of speaking. This is why, even for Adorno, “only one who hears the voice of humankind in the poem’s solitude can understand what the poem is saying.”¹⁵ This can only be done when poetic articulation is precisely not taken to be a moment of heroic individual isolation. Rather it is an articulation of “the unself-consciousness of the subject submitting itself to language”¹⁶; it is an act of letting a subject being spoken, not by society but by what happened to it. If “it”, if “that has happened”, it will speak through the invention of a language to articulate it. Poetry is thus not saying things singularly (only). It also implies an act of being-spoken. It thinks, it speaks, but it is also that which is being said. It would be mistaken, as Adorno sometimes is, to believe poetry is transcendental because in it “language itself speaks”; it is rather that in it “the subject’s own voice”¹⁷ is articulated as something that is foreign to the subject as much as it is foreign to language. Poetry is the voice of such a subject as an invention of its language. Might it be the art - and

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13 Badiou 2014, p. 25.

14 Adorno 2019, p. 60.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., p. 64.

17 Ibid., p. 65.

implying an ethics - of un-saying it well? "Poetry thinks" means thus far that it thinks and speaks from the point of the impossible.

Paul Celan wrote

There also comes a meaning
Down the narrowest cut,
It is breached
By the deadliest of our
Standing marks.¹⁸

There is a certain "quixotism" in its "chimerical yearning for the impossible"¹⁹, in Adorno's words. But how is poetry's present, the present of the narrowest cut (that is breached) thought, re-thought, thought again (and again). Poetry thinks by cutting down meaning, by cutting what it means to mean anything at all, by producing meaning in a new or different way, by meaning otherwise. Meaning-otherwise, meaning-cutting, cutting-meaning: poetry as the art of unsaying it well. What is the present of the cut(ting), the present of poetry? This brief introduction to the new issue of *Crisis and Critique* only sought to indicate that we consider it high time to emphasize, return to, defend and think with our b(r)others and sisters in words (as arms) in dark times. Let us never stop to be bothered by their thought: Fra(e)ternité! With Celan, we affirm:

Two,
Not one -
Yes and?²⁰

The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* gathered thinkers, writers, philosophers, theorists and poets that all think through, think with, think in, and, one might risk saying, count with poetry, with the poem. And they all grapple, unravel, expose, exhibit, unfold its singularly universal dimension "- Yes and?"

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¹⁸ Celan, 2005, p. 142.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 73.

²⁰ Celan 1976, p. 56.

With Angelou, we affirm:

I am in the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.²¹

*Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza
Dundee|Prishtina, June 2022*

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21 Angelou 1978.

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